

# D- and L-amino acids in Antarctic lakes: assessment of a very sensitive HPLC-MS method

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**Abstract** Amino acids represent a fraction of organic matter in marine and freshwater ecosystems, and a source of carbon, nitrogen and energy. L-Amino acids are the most common enantiomers in nature because these chiral forms are used during the biosynthesis of proteins and peptide. To the contrary, the occurrence of D-amino acids is usually linked to the presence of bacteria. We investigated the distribution of L- and D-amino acids in the lacustrine environment of Terra Nova Bay, Antarctica, in order to define their natural composition in this area and to individuate a possible relationship with primary production. A simultaneous chromatographic separation of 40 L- and D-amino acids was performed using a chiral stationary phase based on teicoplanin aglycone (CHIROBIOTIC TAG). The chromatographic separation was coupled to two different mass spectrometers—an LTQ-Orbitrap XL (Thermo Fisher Scientific) and an API 4000 (ABSciex)—in order to investigate their quantitative performance. High-performance liquid chromatography coupled with mass spectrometry methods were evaluated through the estimation of their linear ranges, repeatability, accuracy and detection and

quantification limits. The high-resolution mass spectrometer LTQ-Orbitrap XL presented detection limits between 0.4 and  $7 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ , while the triple quadrupole mass spectrometer API 4000 achieved the best detection limits reported in the literature for the quantification of amino acids (between 4 and  $200 \text{ ng L}^{-1}$ ). The most sensitive method, HPLC-API 4000, was applied to lake water samples.

**Keywords** Amino acids · Chiral separation · Antarctica · HPLC-MS/MS · HPLC-orbitrap · Lakes

## Introduction

Chirality is an important feature of many compounds, as biologically active molecules for which it attributes different biological proprieties or influences the enrichment or the stability in the environment [1]. Most amino acids contain an asymmetric centre, and the analysis of L- or D-enantiomers is very important in several research fields, such as food chemistry [2], geochronology [3] and exploration of other planets [4]. The homochirality of life on Earth occurs because L-amino acids are the only enantiomers used during the biosynthesis of proteins and peptides [5]. To the contrary, the occurrence of certain D-amino acids in cell walls can be attributed to bacterial origin [6]. Some studies demonstrated that D-enantiomers can also be produced by racemisation, indicating an age effect [7–10].

Amino acids are a common source of carbon, nitrogen and energy in both marine and freshwater ecosystems. They operate as important intermediates in the flux of carbon, although their concentrations are usually very low and represent only a small fraction of dissolved organic carbon (DOC) [11].

Berman and Bronk [11] described how amino acids are used as nitrogen sources not only by bacteria but also by numerous phytoplankton species. These compounds are

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released from living phytoplankton, either directly or by cellular lysis of senescent algae [12]. Amino acids can also be generated by the solubilisation of organic material, aerosol particles or transparent proteinaceous particles [13]. Terrestrial plants or the soil's organic matter can also be important contributors to the production of amino acids [14].

One of the main aims of our study was to quantify enantiomeric forms of several amino acids in lacustrine water collected in Terra Nova Bay, Antarctica.

Four samples were collected in three sites: Inexpressible Island (lake 10), Edmonson Point (lakes 14 and 15A) and Tarn Flat (lake 20). The sampling was repeated two times during the austral summer to evaluate possible changes in the composition or concentration of amino acids during the defrost process.

Antarctica represents an excellent natural laboratory to estimate the natural presence, concentration and variability of organic or inorganic compounds due to its distance from anthropogenic emissions [15]. Antarctica is the largest cold desert on Earth [16], except for a few weeks during the austral summer, when waters from melting ice and snow flow into several small ponds and lakes.

Recently, Antarctic lacustrine ecosystems have been investigated to determine major, minor or trace element distributions [17–24], while organic compounds were less extensively studied [16, 25–27]. Antarctic lake waters collected in the McMurdo Dry Valleys were studied in-depth, yielding information on the relationship between water chemistry and microorganisms [17, 18], paleoclimatology [28], chemical alteration and sedimentation [29, 30]. The region of Terra Nova Bay has been studied since 1985, year of the beginning of the Italian National Research Program in Antarctica (P.N.R.A.), but very few investigations [19, 20, 22, 26] addressed the geochemistry of its lacustrine ecosystems. The area's inorganic chemistry was investigated [19, 20, 22, 26], but this is the first study to characterise it by defining its amino acid distributions and to individuate a relationship with primary production.

Another important aim of our research was to develop a simultaneous method to quantify trace concentrations of L- and D-amino acids using a hyphenated technique high-performance liquid chromatography coupled with mass spectrometry (HPLC-MS) in lake water samples.

Enantiomeric separation is usually performed by conventional reversed-phase liquid chromatography, which requires the formation of diastereoisomeric derivatives before chromatographic separation with a chiral reagent [31, 32]. However, this approach presents several disadvantages linked to derivatisation procedures, such as derivate instability, the inadequate enantiopurity of some reagents or long preparation times. A derivatisation procedure is necessary also when gas chromatography is used because the derivate should increase the analyte's volatility [33].

Other possible solutions to separate two enantiomers include using chiral ligand-exchange chromatography [34] or a chiral stationary phase based on  $\alpha$ -cyclodextrin [35], crown ether [36] or teicoplanin [37, 38]. The detector most frequently used to analyse underivatized amino acids is the amperometric/electrochemical detector [39], which has low specificity. Amino acids are ionisable, thermolabile and polar compounds that can be analysed by the most selective electrospray ionisation (ESI) mass spectrometry. Reversed-phase chromatography used on derivatised amino acids can be coupled with mass spectrometry [32], whereas normal phase chromatography, with hexane and heptane as mobile phases, is generally applied to chiral stationary phases to separate underivatized amino acids, and is incompatible with ESI source. The stationary phase based on teicoplanin [40] is able to separate underivatized amino acids primarily in the reversed-phase mode, which makes it compatible with ESI-mass spectrometry.

The main aim of this work was to develop one single chromatographic 35-min run to enantiomerically separate 40 underivatized amino acids using a stationary phase. By coupling with two different mass spectrometers—a high-resolution LTQ-Orbitrap XL mass spectrometer and a triple quadrupole API 4000—we were able to investigate the quantitative performance of two recently developed HPLC-MS methods to determine L- and D-amino acids in environmental samples at trace levels. The best sensitivity was achieved by coupling HPLC with a triple quadrupole. This is also the first study where an high-resolution mass spectrometry (HRMS) method was improved for simultaneous qualitative and quantitative analyses. The application of the latter technique is one of the new trends in environmental analysis to individuate *untargeted* compounds that cannot be detected by low-resolution MS.

## Experimental section

### Reagents and standard solutions

Ultra-grade methanol (MeOH) was purchased from Romil LTD (Cambridge, UK), while Ultrapure water (18.2 M $\Omega$ , 0.01 TOC) was produced using a Purelab Ultra System (Elga, High Wycombe, UK). Formic acid ( $\geq 98\%$ ) eluent additive for HPLC system was obtained from Fluka (Sigma Aldrich®, Buchs, Switzerland) and hydrochloric acid (HCl) 37 % ACS was supplied by Carlo Erba.

Each amino acid standard solution [D- and L-alanine (D-/L-Ala), D- and L-arginine (D-/L-Arg), D- and L-asparagine (D-/L-Asn), D- and L-aspartic acid (D-/L-Asp), D- and L-glutamic acid (D-/L-Glu), glycine (Gly), D- and L-glutamine (D-/L-Gln), D- and L-hydroxyproline (D-/L-Hyp), D- and L-histidine (D-/L-Hys), D- and L-isoleucine (D-/L-Ile), D- and L-leucine (D-/L-

Leu), D- and L-lysine (D-/L-Lys), D- and L-methionine (D-/L-Met), D- and L-ornithine (D-/L-Orn), D- and L-phenylalanine (D-/L-Phe), L-proline (L-Pro), D- and L-serine (D-/L-Ser), D- and L-threonine (D-/L-Thr), D- and L-tyrosine (D-/L-Tyr), D- and L-tryptophan (D-/L-Trp), and D- and L-valine (D-/L-Val)] was prepared by solid standard (purity  $\geq 98\%$ ), and diluted in HCl 0.1 M. The solid standards were purchased from Sigma Aldrich®.

Isotopically labelled  $^{13}\text{C}$  amino acids (L-[ $^{13}\text{C}_3$ ] alanine (Ala\*), L-[ $^{13}\text{C}_4$ ] aspartic acid (Asp\*), L-[ $^{13}\text{C}_5$ ] glutamic acid and L-[ $^{13}\text{C}_6$ ] arginine (Arg\*); purity of 98 %) were obtained from Sigma Aldrich while L-[ $^{13}\text{C}_1$ ] leucine (Leu\*), L-[ $^{13}\text{C}_1$ ] phenylalanine (Phe\*), L-[ $^{13}\text{C}_1$ ] proline (Pro\*) and L-[ $^{13}\text{C}_1$ ] valine (Val\*) (purity  $\geq 98\%$ ) were obtained from Cambridge Isotope Laboratories Inc. (Andover, MA, USA).

### Liquid chromatography–mass spectrometry systems

Underivatised amino acids were separated into L- and D-enantiomers using a CHIROBIOTIC TAG column (2.1  $\times$  250 mm, Advanced Separation Technologies Inc. USA). The column temperature was maintained at 25 °C, and flow rate was 200  $\mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ . Mobile phase A was 0.1 % formic acid, and B was methanol containing 0.1 % formic acid. At the beginning, an isocratic step with 30 % mobile phase B was used to elute the majority of amino acids in 15 min. The linear gradient started with 30 % mobile phase B and reached 100 % over 5 min. To wash the column, the 100 % concentration of eluent B was maintained for 5 min, while the equilibration step was carried out for five additional minutes. The injection volume was 10  $\mu\text{L}$ .

The analysis of underivatised amino acids was performed using two different HPLC-MS systems.

An UltiMate 3000 system (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Sunnyvale, CA, USA) with a quaternary pump, vacuum degasser, autosampler and thermostated column compartment was coupled with a LTQ-Orbitrap XL (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Bremen, Germany) using a heated electrospray interface operated in positive ionisation mode.

The tune method was optimised by directly infusing a 1-mg  $\text{L}^{-1}$  amino acid standard water solution into the mass spectrometer's ion source. The tune method was based on the following parameters: spray voltage, 4 kV; temperature, 350 °C; capillary voltage, 5 V; tube lens, 40 V; sheath gas, 50 arb units; and auxiliary gas, 15 arb units. All mass spectra were acquired in profile mode using the Orbitrap mass analyser at a mass resolving power of 60,000 (FWHM, at  $m/z$  400; 0.5 s scan cycle time) with the diisooctyl-phthalate at  $m/z$  391.2845 as lock mass. Accurate mass measurements of  $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$  of the amino acids were carried out by scanning from 60 to 400  $m/z$ . The ion injection time was 50 ms with the automatic gain control (AGC, corresponding to the number of

changes transferred from the front-stage ion trap to the orbitrap analyser) target set at  $1 \times 10^5$ .

Data were processed using Xcalibur 2.1.0 (Thermo Fisher Scientific, San Jose, CA, USA) and Thermo LCquant 2.6.1 software. The extracted ion chromatograms (XICs) were generated by extracting a small range ( $\pm 10$  ppm), centred on the exact  $m/z$  of each analyte. The elementary composition of each amino acid, the theoretical monoisotopic  $m/z$  of each  $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$  and the measured mass accuracy (ppm) are summarised in Table 1.

An Agilent 1100 Series HPLC Systems (Waldbronn, Germany; with a binary pump, vacuum degasser, autosampler and thermostated column compartment) was coupled with an API 4000 Triple Quadrupole Mass Spectrometer (Applied Biosystem/MSD SCIEX, Concord, Ontario, Canada) using a TurboV electrospray source that operated in positive mode.

The mass spectrometer's parameters were optimised as follows: temperature, 500 °C; ion spray voltage, 5,450 eV; GS1, 22 psi; GS2, 70 psi; curtain gas, 30 psi; collision gas (CAD), 4 psi; and entrance potential, 10 V. Data were collected in multiple reaction monitoring (MRM) mode. The first quadrupole (Q1) selected the precursor ion, while the third quadrupole selected the product ion. Both Q1 and Q3 were set at unit resolution with peak width of  $0.7 \pm 0.1$  amu at 50 % of maximum peak height. Two transitions were considered for each analyte: The most intense one was applied to the quantification, while the second was used to confirm the presence of amino acids.

In order to achieve the highest possible sensitivity, declustering potential, collision energy and collision cell exit potential were optimised. Optimisation was performed using direct infusions of 1 mg  $\text{L}^{-1}$  of individual standard of amino acids. The monitored transition and instrumental parameters for each compound are summarised in Table 1. Analyst Software version 1.5.2 (Applied Biosystems, MDS SCIEX Instruments) was used for the identification and quantification of the target compounds.

### Study site

The sampling was carried out during the 2011–2012 austral summer field activity in Antarctica in the framework of the “Progetto Nazionale di Ricerche in Antartide” (PNRA).

Antarctic lacustrine waters were collected in four different lakes located at Inexpressible Island (lake 10), Edmonson Point (lakes 14 and 15A) and Tarn Flat (lake 20). The lakes considered in this study are frozen during the winter but completely ice free during a few weeks in the austral summer. Snow and ice melt are the only water input for these small and shallow lakes. The geographic characteristics of the sampling points and the sampling features are presented in the Electronic Supplementary Material (ESM) Table S1.

**Table 1** Summary of the theoretical mass used to construct an XIC for each analyte with 10 ppm as tolerance from Orbitrap full scan and each MRM transition used by the API 4000

Amino acid	Elemental composition	Theoretical mass [M+H] <sup>+</sup>	Mass accuracy (ppm) <sup>a</sup>	MRM transitions	DP/CE/CXP
D-/L-Ala	C <sub>3</sub> H <sub>7</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	90.0550	2.2	90>44	32/17/7
D-/L-Arg	C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>14</sub> N <sub>4</sub> O <sub>2</sub>	175.119	0.2	175>70 (116)	53/33/13 (53/21/21)
D-/L-Asp	C <sub>4</sub> H <sub>7</sub> NO <sub>4</sub>	134.0448	0.1	134>74 (88)	34/21/13 (34/15/13)
D-/L-Asn	C <sub>4</sub> H <sub>8</sub> N <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	133.0608	0.7	133>74 (87)	35/22/7 (35/13/8)
D-/L-Gln	C <sub>5</sub> H <sub>10</sub> N <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	147.0764	-0.6	147>130 (84)	38/15/11 (38/22/7)
D-/L-Glu	C <sub>5</sub> H <sub>9</sub> NO <sub>4</sub>	148.0604	0.3	148>84 (130)	40/24/16 (40/14/23)
Gly	C <sub>2</sub> H <sub>5</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	76.0393	2.6	76>76 (30)	33/6/11 (33/17/4)
D-/L-Hyp	C <sub>5</sub> H <sub>9</sub> NO <sub>3</sub>	132.0655	-0.1	132>68 (86)	47/31/6 (47/21/7)
D-/L-Hys	C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>9</sub> N <sub>3</sub> O <sub>2</sub>	156.0768	0.3	156>110 (83)	46/20/20 (46/36/15)
D-/L-Leu/Ile	C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>13</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	132.1019	0.8	132>86 (69)	41/15/16 (41/26/13)
D-/L-Lys	C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>14</sub> N <sub>2</sub> O <sub>2</sub>	147.1128	2.8	147>84 (130)	32/24/15 (32/15/23)
D-/L-Met	C <sub>5</sub> H <sub>11</sub> NO <sub>2</sub> S	150.0583	-0.2	150>104 (133)	39/15/16 (39/15/23)
D-/L-Orn	C <sub>5</sub> H <sub>12</sub> N <sub>2</sub> O <sub>2</sub>	133.0972	0.6	133>70 (116)	45/24/11 (45/12/15)
D-/L-Phe	C <sub>9</sub> H <sub>11</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	166.0863	1.6	166>120 (103)	43/18/22 (43/38/19)
L-Pro	C <sub>5</sub> H <sub>9</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	116.0706	-0.6	116>70	42/24/13
D-/L-Ser	C <sub>3</sub> H <sub>7</sub> NO <sub>3</sub>	106.0499	0.1	106/60 (88)	34/17/10 (34/15/16)
D-/L-Thr	C <sub>4</sub> H <sub>9</sub> NO <sub>3</sub>	120.0655	1.5	120/103 (77)	78/26/18 (78/36/14)
D-/L-Trp	C <sub>11</sub> H <sub>12</sub> N <sub>2</sub> O <sub>2</sub>	205.0972	-0.3	205>188 (146)	53/15/17 (53/24/13)
D-/L-Tyr	C <sub>9</sub> H <sub>11</sub> NO <sub>3</sub>	182.0812	-0.5	182>165 (136)	43/15/15 (43/21/12)
D-/L-Val	C <sub>5</sub> H <sub>11</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	118.0863	2.2	118>72 (55)	35/17/13 (35/30/10)
L-[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>3</sub> ] Ala	C <sub>3</sub> H <sub>7</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	93.0650	0.4	93>46	37/19/8
L-[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>6</sub> ] Arg	[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>6</sub> ]H <sub>14</sub> N <sub>4</sub> O <sub>2</sub>	181.1391	-0.2	181>74 (121)	55/21/7 (55/21/11)
L-[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>4</sub> ] Asp	[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>4</sub> ]H <sub>7</sub> NO <sub>4</sub>	138.0588	3.6	138/76 (91)	42/22/7 (42/15/10)
L-[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>5</sub> ] Glu	[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>5</sub> ]H <sub>9</sub> NO <sub>4</sub>	153.0772	0.5	153>135 (106)	39/13/12 (39/19/10)
L-[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>1</sub> ] Leu	[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>1</sub> ]C <sub>5</sub> H <sub>13</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	—	—	133>86 (44)	45/16/7 (45/31/8)
L-[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>1</sub> ] Phe	[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>1</sub> ]C <sub>8</sub> H <sub>11</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	—	—	167>121 (104)	51/19/11 (51/38/10)
L-[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>1</sub> ] Pro	[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>1</sub> ]C <sub>4</sub> H <sub>9</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	—	—	117>70 (68)	40/24/6 (40/41/6)
L-[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>1</sub> ] Val	[ <sup>13</sup> C <sub>1</sub> ]C <sub>4</sub> H <sub>11</sub> NO <sub>2</sub>	—	—	119>72 (55)	45/18/6 (45/29/5)

For each MRM transition we reported the values of declustering potential (DP), collision energy (CE) and cell exit potential (CXP). The parenthetical values advert to the qualifier ions

<sup>a</sup> Measured from the 100 ng mL<sup>-1</sup> standard solution using to generate the calibration curves

Each lake has its unique characteristics in terms of origin, depth and the nature of its surrounding area.

Inexpressible Island is situated in front of a coastal polynya of Terra Nova Bay, which is free from sea-ice cover all year round. This marine area is characterised by intense and persistent katabatic winds. These cold and dense air masses moving from the Antarctic plateau to the sea promote the formation of the polynya. Lake 10 extends over 4,000 m<sup>2</sup>, with a maximum depth of about 2 m and limited accumulation of mats above surface sediments.

The two lakes at Edmonson Point (14 and 15A) are located near the active volcano of Mount Melbourne, and this site extends over ca. 6 km<sup>2</sup> with hills, knolls and moraines separated by small valleys and by a beach. The area's ground surface consists of coarse volcanic materials such as scoria, pumice, tuff and lava. The availability of freshwater and

nutrients, derived by marine aerosol and by nesting sea-birds, encourages the development of vegetal communities [41]. The main phototrophs in inland freshwaters are cyanobacteria [42], but there are many other organisms such as diatoms, bacteria, yeasts, protozoans, rotifers, nematodes and tardigrades [43]. The sampling was conducted in the small lake 14, which covers a surface area of about 400 m<sup>2</sup> and has a maximum depth of about 1 m. The dimension of this lake was drastically reduced over the last decade, as demonstrated by Bargagli et al. [44], who reported a surface area of 3,500 m<sup>2</sup> in January 2006. The other sampled site was lake 15A, with a surface area of 2,000 m<sup>2</sup> and a depth of 1 m.

The Tarn Flat area is located between the Larsen and Reeves Glaciers, and alternates between wide hills and depressions. Tarn Flat Lake (lake 20) lies in one of these depressions (-70 m). It has a surface area of about 17,700 m<sup>2</sup> and a



maximum depth of 4 m. The main input of this lake is the melt water of glaciers, while persistent winds prevent snow accumulation.

Each lake was sampled at two different dates (ESM Table S1) to evaluate the changes in amino acid composition that may have occurred during the defrost process.

### Samples collection and processing

Lacustrine waters were collected into two 2-L glass bottles, pre-cleaned with water and methanol.

In the laboratory of the “Mario Zucchelli Station” (Antarctica), the water sample contained in the first bottle was processed in a clean environment under a Class-100 laminar flow bench-hood. Water was filtered using pre-ignited (400 °C for 4 h) filters (Whatman GF/F), and the filtered water was frozen at −20 °C to await analysis. This filtrated water was used to determine amino acid concentration in the dissolved fraction, after spiking with internal standards solution (average concentrations about 40 µg L<sup>−1</sup>).

An aliquot of collected water (500 mL) was filtered using mixed cellulose ester membrane filters (MCE) (0.2 µm, Ø 0.47 mm, Whatman, Dassel, Germany). Nutrient analyses [PO<sub>4</sub><sup>3−</sup>, NO<sub>3</sub><sup>−</sup>, NO<sub>2</sub><sup>−</sup>, NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup> and Si(OH)<sub>4</sub>] were carried out on the filtrate of this aliquot using American Public Health Association (APHA) standard method 4500 with appropriate colorimetric kits. The MCE filters were extracted with acetone/water solution (9:1), and chlorophyll *a* was determined. The absorption was measured spectrophotometrically at 665 nm [45].

The second lacustrine water bottle was immediately frozen at −20 °C. The filtration step was carried out following the defrost process and an ultrasonically sonification (for 30 min) in order to release amino acids by cell lysis. The total concentration of amino acids was determined after spiking with internal standards solution (average concentrations, 40 µg L<sup>−1</sup>).

The concentration of amino acids in the particulate fraction was calculated by subtracting of total concentration and that in dissolved fraction.

## Results and discussion

### Chromatographic separation

After optimising the parameters of the orbitrap-MS as detailed in the “Experimental section”, the chromatographic method was performed in order to simultaneously distinguish several L- and D-amino acids in aqueous samples without derivatising them.

Several methods were applied to the enantiomeric separation of amino acids using conventional reversed-phase columns after the formation of diastereoisomers with chiral reagents [31, 32].

Berthod et al. [46] reported that the stationary phase based on teicoplanin aglycone, called CHIROBIOTIC TAG, is characterised by higher selectivity and resolution for the majority of amino acids than other teicoplanin stationary phases. In their works, the composition of the mobile phase was changed to obtain the best chromatographic performance (enantioselectivity and resolution) for each couple of enantiomers.

In our study, this stationary phase was chosen to simultaneously separate several L- and D-amino acids [46].

CHIROBIOTIC TAG is one of the most appropriate columns to analyse amino acids with a hyphenated system HPLC-MS and without any previous derivatisation because it permits to separate optical isomers using volatile mobile phase with a high percentage of organic solvent, preserving the spray stability [38, 47, 48].

The diverse chemical features of amino acids require mobile phases with different compositions for neutral, basic or acid compounds, in order to obtaining the best selectivity and resolution.

Our aim was to develop a unique HPLC-MS method to quantify trace concentrations of 40 L- and D-amino acids for environmental applications in remote areas.

Enantiomeric separations with CHIROBIOTIC TAG column is usually improved by an alcoholic mobile phase [40].

Four different starting compositions of the mobile phase (10, 20, 30 and 40 % of eluent B) were tested considering retention time, peak width for each amino acids, enantioselectivity and resolution for each L- and D- optical isomer (ESM Tables S3 and S3).

The chromatographic run performed in this study consisted in a first 15-min isocratic step, where most amino acids were eluted, followed by a gradient step to 100 % methanol in order to elute some D-amino acids and to clean the column from organic compounds. This step permits to regenerate the column and to achieve great stability and reproducibility in our chromatographic separation.

In general, we observed that the peak width of D-amino acids were larger than those of L-compounds because the stationary phase of CHIROBIOTIC TAG column has more affinity with D-amino acids, whose retention time is always higher than in L-isomers [40].

An isocratic elution with 10 or 20 % of eluent B was carried out to co-elute L- and D-glutamine and L- and D-histidine, while 30 % of eluent B permitted to obtain an enantioselectivity >1 for each analyte (ESM Table S3).

We demonstrated that the stationary phase based on teicoplanin aglycone cannot separate positional isomers such

as leucine and isoleucine, which are separated using the stationary phase of CHIROBIOTIC T column [37].

A starting composition of 40 % of eluent B produced the best enantioselectivity and resolution for the majority of amino acids considered in this study, but it generated a broadening effect on D-arginine and D-lysine peaks, as reported in ESM Table S3.

For these reasons, the starting composition of 30 % of eluent B was preferred for our chromatographic separation (Fig. 1 and ESM Fig. S1).

### Quality control

The accuracy of the analysis is often affected by undetected matrix components, which co-elute with the target compounds and enhance or suppress ion intensity in the HPLC/MS interface [49, 50].

In this study, we demonstrated that such matrix effect (ME) can be considered by using the internal standard through a quantitative study, as suggested by Matuszewski et al. [51]. For these evaluations, we used the HPLC-MS/MS method, which demonstrated the best sensitivity (as reported below).

We calculated the ME for each amino acid by dividing the signal response of the standard present in the matrix by the response of the standard prepared in ultrapure water, and by expressing the result as a percentage. When no ME is observed, the value is 100 %; a value >100 % indicates ionisation enhancement, while a value <100 % indicates ionisation suppression. In ESM Table S4, we can observe ionisation suppression for several amino acids when no internal standard is used (ME %–IS). A ME with internal standard

(ME % + IS) for each amino acid was also by dividing the signal ratio of amino acids and internal standard in the matrix by the signal ratio of the target compound and internal standard in ultrapure water. As shown in ESM Table S4, the internal standard method reduces the ME: Values close to 100 % (no ME) were obtained for all amino acids considered in our study, except for D-Ser, where a higher suppression remained.

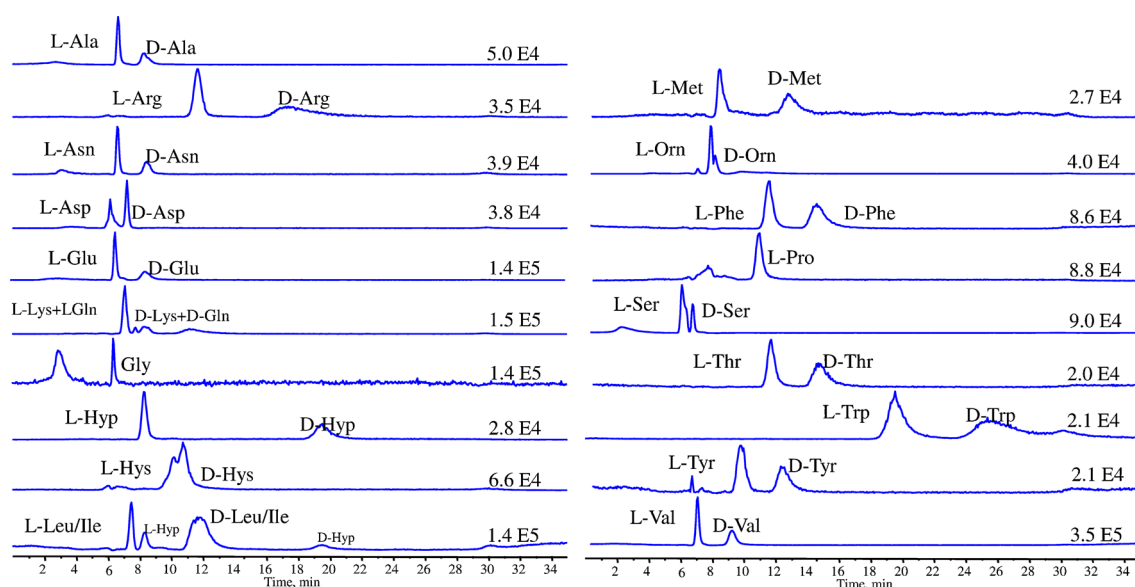
In order to ensure that our analytical method could be applied to real samples, we needed to evaluate its accuracy, i.e., the degree of closeness of the determined value to the known “true” value. It is expressed as an error percentage, calculated as  $(Q - T)/T \times 100$ , where  $Q$  is the determined value and  $T$  is the “true value”.

In our experiments, we considered a real matrix (lake 20 of 20 December) and calculated the concentration of each amino acid using the addition standard method with a range of average concentrations until to  $100 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$  (ppb).

The true values in the lake matrix were considered as the known addition of standard amino acids minus the values present in the matrix.

We calculated the error percentage using the external calibration curve without internal standard, obtained by diluting the standard in ultrapure water [52]. The ionisation suppression, verified by quantifying the ME, compromised the quantification, as demonstrated by the error percentage ( $\text{E\% ECC} > \pm 10\%$  for the majority of amino acids (ESM Table S4).

A matrix-matched calibration permits to correct the incidence of the ME [52], yielding an error percentage ( $\text{E\% ICC} \leq \pm 10\%$  for all the investigated amino acids and



**Fig. 1** Chromatograms of single amino acids using a  $2.1 \times 250$  mm CHIROBIOTIC TAG column coupled with API 4000 mass spectrometer. Each ion chromatogram is related to the quantifier ions used in the MRM

method for a standard solution of amino acids with an average concentration of  $10 \text{ ng mL}^{-1}$

demonstrating that this quantification method can be applied to the analysis of real samples.

The use of a calibration curve with an internal standard prepared in ultrapure water permits to standardise the procedure for lacustrine water samples and requires no matrix to quantify the samples. The reduction of ME allowed that the quantification with the internal standard method produce an error percentage ( $E\%$  IS)  $\leq \pm 10\%$  for the all amino acids except for D-Ser, D-Orn, L- and D-Trp for which this method is not applicable (ESM Table S4).

#### Comparison of quantitative performance between LTQ-Orbitrap XL full scan and API 4000 MRM detection

In order to compare the quantification performances achieved by the full scan method of the LTQ-Orbitrap XL mass spectrometer and by the MRM method of the API 4000 (triple quadrupole), the same chromatographic conditions reported in the “[Experimental section](#)” were applied to the separation of amino acid enantiomers. The two methods were evaluated in terms of linear range, repeatability and detection limits.

The internal standard method by isotope dilution was used to quantify the amino acids and to compare the compound peak area with the  $^{13}\text{C}$ -labelled isotopomers. Some  $^{13}\text{C}$ -mono-labelled amino acids (L- $^{13}\text{C}_1$ ] Leu, L- $^{13}\text{C}_1$ ] Phe, L- $^{13}\text{C}_1$ ] Pro and L- $^{13}\text{C}_1$ ] Val) could not be used with the orbitrap analyser because, using the full scan method, the internal standard quantification was heavily interfered with by the natural abundance of native amino acids present in the sample. For this reason, these  $^{13}\text{C}$ -labelled isotopomers were used only with the triple quadrupole analyser. A  $^{13}\text{C}$ -labelled amino acid with similar chemical features was considered in the quantification when the specific  $^{13}\text{C}$ -labelled amino acid was not available. The specific  $^{13}\text{C}$ -labelled amino acids used for each quantification both with the orbitrap and triple quadrupole analysers are reported in Table 2.

The linearity of the calibration curves for the quantitative determination of single amino acids with internal standard was evaluated using a series of standard solutions prepared in ultrapure water at average concentrations of 0.01, 0.05, 0.1, 0.5, 1, 5, 10, 20, 50, 75, 100, 200, 300 and 500  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$  and a constant internal standards concentration (ranging between 40 and 60  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ ). By considering the ratio between the concentration of native and labelled amino acids and the ratio between the relative peak areas, we obtained linearity values of  $R^2 \geq 0.99$  for both analysers. The coefficients of variation (CV) were calculated at five average concentrations (0.01, 0.1, 1, 10 and 100  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ ) using the triple quadrupole analyser and at three average concentrations (1, 10 and 100  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ ) using the orbitrap analyser in order to evaluate instrumental repeatability. The CV values were always lower than 10 % for both analysers.

The high mass accuracy obtained with full scan HRMS can effectively separate the target compound from the background ions or compounds that have the same nominal mass but a different exact mass. We verified these features in our analysis of Gln and Lys. The analysis conducted with MRM showed that these amino acids have the same precursor ion (147  $m/z$  with at unit resolution) and the same product ions (130 and 84  $m/z$ ). The use of the triple quadrupole to quantify these compounds was rejected because no chromatographic separation was performed. Different exact masses (Table 1) of Gln and Lys enabled a quantification using the full scan HRMS method.

The main difference between the two methods regards their instrumental limits of detection and quantification (LOD and LOQ), calculated according to Bliesner [53], who defined LOD and LOQ as three and ten times the signal-to-noise ratio of the known absolute amounts of the analysed target compound in a standard solution. The LODs obtained with the orbitrap analyser ranged between 0.4 (L-Phe and L-Thr) and 7  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$  (D-Arg and D-Orn), while the LOQs ranged between 1 (L-Phe and L-Thr) and 24  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$  (D-Orn). The triple quadrupole yielded LOD values between 0.004 (L-Glu, L-Ser and L-Val) and 0.2  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$  (L- and D-Orn), while LOQs yielded values between 0.01 (L-Glu, L-Ser and L-Val) and 3  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$  (D-Met) (Table 2).

Due to the higher LOD values, the linear response obtained with the orbitrap analyser was three orders of magnitude; with the triple quadrupole analyser, it was five or six orders of magnitude.

Petritis et al. [39] conducted a very interesting comparison between liquid chromatographic detectors. They demonstrated that MS tandem spectrometry is the most sensitive technique to quantify amino acids, with LOD ranging between 0.08 and 8  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ . Another important detection advantage of mass spectrometry is its high specificity, although co-elution of several amino acids can occur. Petritis et al. [39] noted that their LOD values were affected by analyte ionisation in the aqueous mobile phase, which decreased the ion extraction. Their values were higher than the LODs obtained using hydrophilic interaction liquid chromatography (HILIC) [54], where acetonitrile/water (75:25) was used as mobile phase.

In contrast, the LOD values obtained in our study were very similar to those yielded by non-chiral HILIC separation with the same MS tandem spectrometer [55, 56] thanks to the use of a heated ionisation source. To our knowledge, the MS tandem proposed in this paper to determine the single enantiomers of 20 amino acids is the most sensitive method reported in the literature.

Although the HRMS method yielded higher LOD values than those found using the triple quadrupole, the good quantitative performance of HRMS method was demonstrated, and this method can be applied to samples where the

**Table 2** Comparison between the quantitative performances of the HPLC-LTQ-Orbitrap XL and the HPLC-API 4000 to analyse amino acid enantiomers

	HPLC-LTQ Orbitrap XL method							HPLC-API 4000 method						
	IS	$R^2$	Linear range ( $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ )		LOD ( $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ )	LOQ ( $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ )		IS	$R^2$	Linear range ( $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ )		LOD ( $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ )	LOQ ( $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ )	
L-Ala	Ala*	0.999	9	–	557	1	4	Ala*	0.999	0.02	–	871	0.02	0.05
D-Ala	Ala*	0.999	9	–	575	5	16	Ala*	0.991	0.09	–	899	0.4	1
L-Arg	Arg*	0.999	7	–	447	1	5	Arg*	0.997	0.01	–	279	0.005	0.02
D-Arg	Arg*	0.999	13	–	426	7	22	Arg*	0.997	1	–	266	0.1	0.3
L-Asn	Arg*	0.999	6	–	400	2	5	Val*	0.992	0.01	–	625	0.01	0.03
D-Asn	Arg*	0.999	14	–	446	4	12	Val*	0.983	0.01	–	696	0.08	0.2
L-Asp	Asp*	0.992	7	–	436	3	11	Asp*	0.998	0.1	–	681	0.08	0.3
D-Asp	Asp*	0.985	8	–	512	4	14	Asp*	0.992	0.2	–	320	0.07	0.2
L-Gln	Arg*	0.996	8	–	520	1	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
D-Gln	Arg*	0.997	6	–	364	2	7	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
L-Glu	Glu*	0.998	10	–	610	1	3	Glu*	0.998	0.02	–	954	0.004	0.01
D-Glu	Glu*	0.998	13	–	404	2	8	Glu*	0.991	0.1	–	631	0.05	0.2
Gly	Ala*	0.986	10	–	160	3	10	Ala*	0.999	0.1	–	1000	0.08	0.3
L-Hyp	Ala*	0.999	8	–	520	3	9	Pro*	0.986	0.02	–	813	0.007	0.02
D-Hyp	Ala*	0.987	6	–	364	1	4	Pro*	0.984	0.1	–	569	0.08	0.2
L-Hys	Arg*	0.995	6	–	407	1	5	Arg*	0.996	0.1	–	127	0.005	0.02
D-Hys	Arg*	0.999	8	–	485	2	8	Arg*	0.994	0.2	–	152	0.01	0.04
L-Leu/Ile	Arg*	0.988	12	–	790	1	3	Leu*	0.990	0.02	–	494	0.01	0.04
D-Leu/Ile	Arg*	0.999	13	–	851	6	20	Leu*	0.996	0.03	–	798	0.006	0.02
L-Lys	Glu*	0.993	6	–	382	1	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
D-Lys	Glu*	0.993	13	–	406	5	17	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
L-Met	Arg*	0.984	9	–	553	1	2	Leu*	0.989	0.09	–	864	0.07	0.2
D-Met	Arg*	0.998	12	–	377	4	12	Leu*	0.998	0.12	–	589	0.8	2
L-Orn	Arg*	0.987	6	–	406	1	5	Arg*	0.994	0.01	–	254	0.2	0.6
D-Orn	Arg*	0.999	9	–	588	7	24	Arg*	0.953	0.2	–	367	0.2	0.5
L-Phe	Arg*	0.999	6	–	386	0.4	1	Phe*	0.995	0.06	–	121	0.01	0.03
D-Phe	Arg*	0.999	6	–	383	1	4	Phe*	0.992	0.1	–	120	0.04	0.1
L-Pro	Arg*	0.998	8	–	482	6	22	Pro*	0.997	0.02	–	753	0.008	0.02
L-Ser	Arg*	0.998	10	–	637	1	4	Arg*	0.990	0.02	–	398	0.004	0.01
D-Ser	Arg*	0.993	6	–	400	3	10	Arg*	0.994	0.6	–	250	0.1	0.4
L-Thr	Arg*	0.998	7	–	450	0.4	1	Arg*	0.997	0.01	–	148	0.005	0.02
D-Thr	Arg*	0.992	7	–	428	1	2	Arg*	0.997	0.07	–	134	0.009	0.03
L-Trp	Arg*	0.996	7	–	440	1	4	Phe*	0.992	0.06	–	125	0.01	0.04
D-Trp	Arg*	0.999	19	–	1200	1	5	Phe*	0.992	0.6	–	130	0.1	0.04
L-Tyr	Arg*	0.998	6	–	398	1	4	Arg*	0.994	0.1	–	138	0.01	0.05
D-Tyr	Arg*	0.999	13	–	417	6	21	Arg*	0.996	0.2	–	188	0.01	0.4
L-Val	Ala*	0.998	8	–	538	3	9	Val*	0.991	0.02	–	168	0.004	0.01
D-Val	Ala*	0.997	7	–	426	5	17	Val*	0.994	0.2	–	125	0.06	0.2

concentrations of amino acids is higher respect to that of samples from a remote area.

In contrast with the MRM method, one of the advantages of full scan HRMS is that the data can be mined at a later time without any need of re-injecting the samples, so obtaining an *untarget* analysis. The main trend in environmental research is

currently to discover other possible markers and the HRMS permits to obtain such specificity thanks to mass resolution and mass accuracy.

This is the first study that considers this technique for amino acids analysis, and the method we developed provides good quantitative and qualitative performance.



## Amino acids in Antarctic freshwater samples

The internal standard method used to determine amino acid enantiomers with the hyphenated technique HPLC-orbitrap MS was applied to the freshwater samples collected in four Antarctic lakes. The analyte concentration was always below the LODs, showing that a more sensitive method was necessary. The application of the instrumental method to the HPLC-API 4000 system produced the expected results, with amino acid concentration above LOD.

The four samples of lacustrine water (lakes 10, 14, 15A and 20) collected during the XXVII Italian Antarctic Campaign (2011–2012) presented total amino acid concentrations ranging between  $10 \mu\text{g C L}^{-1}$  ( $0.2 \mu\text{M}$ ) and  $110 \mu\text{g C L}^{-1}$  ( $2.3 \mu\text{M}$ ) during the first sampling (December 2011); those values varied between  $6 \mu\text{g C L}^{-1}$  ( $99 \text{ nM}$ ) and  $472 \mu\text{g C L}^{-1}$  ( $8.5 \mu\text{M}$ ) during the second sampling (January 2012), when the defrost process was completed. An increase in amino acid concentration was generally observed for lakes 10 and 14, while lakes 20 and 15A indicated possible dilution during the defrost process.

These values were very similar to those individuated in several European lakes [14, 57–64], where the concentrations of free amino acids ranged between 2 and  $800 \text{ nM}$ , but considerably lower than those of Organic Lake (East Antarctica) ( $48\text{--}268 \mu\text{M}$ ) reported by Gibson et al. [25]. To our knowledge, no other research was conducted to individuate amino acids in Antarctic lacustrine water.

The composition and relative abundance of amino acids were very variable in the different lakes investigated, due to their different location, depth and to the nature of their freshwater.

In lake 10, situated on Inexpressible Island, the total concentration in free amino acids varied between  $207 \text{ nM}$  (22 December 2011) and  $643 \text{ nM}$  (07 January 2012), as reported in Fig. 2. This increase in concentration was probably linked to an increment of fluorescence, which is a proxy of primary productivity. The concentration of chlorophyll *a* was below LOD in the first sample, while a concentration of  $0.6 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$  was detected in the second sample. Moreover, in the sample collected in January, the amino acids were principally distributed in the particulate fraction, confirming the presence of biological material in freshwater. In this lake, we found concentrations above LODs for L-Ala, L-Arg, L-Glu, Gly, L-Leu/Ile, L-Phe, L-Pro, L-Tyr and L-Val (Fig. 2). The most abundant amino acids in this lake were Gly (20–22 %), L-Glu (11–21 %) and L-Leu/Ile (23–9 %). The absence of D-amino acids was probably due to a negligible presence of bacteria.

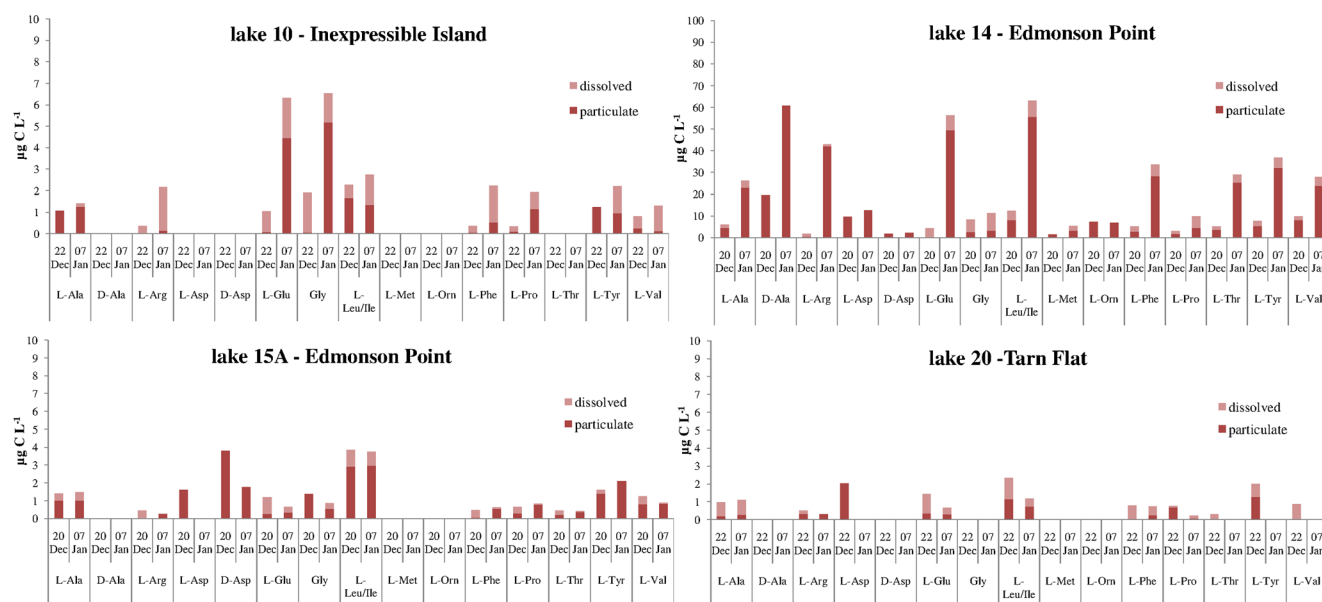
At Edmonson Point, two different lakes (14 and 15A) were sampled, but the composition and abundance of amino acids were completely different.

Primary growth was evident in lake 14, where values of chlorophyll *a* increased from 5 to  $16 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ . High concentrations of nutrients (ESM Table S5), also due to the presence of penguins in the area, offered a good substratum to algal bloom. Primary productivity heavily influenced the abundance and composition of amino acids (Fig. 2), and concentrations above the LOD ( $110$  and  $472 \mu\text{g C L}^{-1}$ ) were detected for the following amino acids: L-Ala, D-Ala, L-Arg, L-Asp, D-Asp, L-Glu, Gly, L-Leu/Ile, L-Met, L-Orn, L-Phe, L-Pro, L-Thr, L-Tyr, and L-Val. A homogenous distribution was observed, with percentages between 7 % (L-Tyr, 20 December) and 18 % (D-Ala, 20 December), while lower concentrations were verified for D-Asp, Gly, L-Met, L-Orn and L-Pro. The presence of bacteria was confirmed by relevant concentrations of D-Ala and D-Asp: These compounds are released by the biodegradation of peptidoglycan membranes [65].

At Edmonson Point, lake 15A showed lower concentrations of amino acids (Fig. 2) than lake 14, and a small decrease in total amino acid concentrations from  $19 \mu\text{g C L}^{-1}$  (20 December) to  $15 \mu\text{g C L}^{-1}$  (07 January). A possible cause could be the presence of primary production in December (concentration of chlorophyll *a* of  $0.9 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ ), while the value of chlorophyll *a* was below LOD in the second sample. The decrease in concentration can also be linked to dilution during defrost or to the stripping of biological material with the formation of the outlet stream. Lake 15A was characterised by the presence of the following amino acids: L-Ala, L-Arg, L-Asp, D-Asp, L-Glu, Gly, L-Leu/Ile, L-Phe, L-Pro, L-Thr, L-Tyr and L-Val (Fig. 2). The presence of bacteria was confirmed by the quantified concentration of D-Asp.

Lake 20 situated in Tarn Flat had concentrations of amino acids very similar to those of lake 15A, with values ranging between  $15 \mu\text{g C L}^{-1}$  during sampling in December and of  $6 \mu\text{g C L}^{-1}$  in January. However, only 11 amino acids were detected (L-Ala, L-Arg, L-Asp, L-Glu, L-Leu/Ile, MetSO<sub>2</sub>, L-Phe, L-Pro, L-Thr, L-Tyr and L-Val) (Fig. 2). L-Leu was one of the most abundant compounds in this hollow area (15 % in December and 20 % in January), while the concentration of D-amino acids above LODs suggests a negligible presence of bacteria.

The average concentrations of amino acids in lakes 15A and 20 were about half than those detected in lake 10 (Fig. 2). These values suggest that sea spray influences the water chemistry in lake 10. This marine influence, also verified by Abollino et al. [19], varies as a function of the distance from the sea and of geomorphological conditions, such as the presence of surface melt water or shallow level ground water. Lakes 10 and 15A (ESM Table S1) are situated at the same distance from the sea, but the input of low salinity water from fresh water by the snow and glaciers in lake



**Fig. 2** Distribution of D- and L-amino acids in four Antarctic lakes

15A causes the dilution of amino acids, as demonstrated by the salinity value (ESM Table S4).

## Conclusions

We developed a unique simultaneous chiral separation with chiral stationary phase based on teicoplaninaglycone (CHIROBIOTIC TAG) to determine 40 L- and D-amino acids using a HPLC-MS system. To our knowledge, this is the first method that permits to simultaneously separate several amino acids in 35 min. The coupling with an orbitrap MS, we obtained an innovative high-resolution method to determine the single enantiomers of amino acids with detection limits between 0.4 and 7  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ . The most sensitive method was performed using the coupling with the triple quadrupole API 4000, obtaining LODs values between 4 and 200  $\text{ng L}^{-1}$ . To our knowledge, this is the most sensitive method to quantify single enantiomeric forms of amino acids. While the triple quadrupole analyser achieves excellent sensitivity, the orbitrap analyser allows also an *untargeted* analysis.

In order to demonstrate the applicability of this method to the environmental field, the most sensitive HPLC-MS methods developed in this study were applied to eight water samples collected in four Antarctic lakes, in order to characterise their amino acid distribution and to investigate a possible relationship with primary production.

Four different lakes were sampled at different times. Lake 14, located at Edmonson Point, had the highest concentration in amino acids. These concentrations were associated to primary growth, which increased between the first and second sampling. In this lake, the presence of D-amino acids suggested the growth of bacteria. The main differences between this lake and the others were its dimensions and the presence of penguins as N sources. Climate changes drastically reduced the lake's area in the last decade, and probably, this have carried out to a concentration of nutrients with a primary growth.

In the others sites, the concentrations of amino acids were lower than in lake 14, due to negligible or very low primary growth. We demonstrated that the sea influence on lake 10 at Inexpressible Island produced a small increase in amino acid concentrations.

We can conclude that amino acids can be used as markers of primary production, but that monitoring of these compounds during the next sampling periods will be necessary to control the influence of climate changes on biological production.

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